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Washington, D.C. -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced major initiatives to respond to the hepatitis C virus (HCV) epidemic in a comprehensive and consistent manner across its nationwide health-care system. VA believes its approach has application for public health and medical response to the epidemic beyond its own health-care system.

Two new "hepatitis C centers of excellence," to be located at VA medical centers in Miami and San Francisco, were named today to coordinate treatment and research efforts, as well as develop education for patients and their families, health-care providers, and counselors who will advise patients prior to and following testing.

"We are funding these two hepatitis C research and education centers to provide leadership on clinical issues and to serve as 'learning laboratories' to foster education and improved intervention strategies," said Dr. Kenneth W. Kizer, VA Under Secretary for Health. "Hepatitis C is of particular concern for VA because of its greater prevalence in VA's service population. VA's goal is that every patient who needs and wants treatment will receive it."

VA is increasing its attention to the public health threat consistent with American medicine's gains in diagnosis, treatment and case management since the virus was first characterized by the name hepatitis C in 1989, testing for blood supplies began in 1992, and treatment was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in June 1998.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates the prevalence of hepatitis C in the general public to be 1.8 percent of the population. Current estimates of the prevalence of hepatitis C in active military troops are substantially lower at 0.3 percent; however, preliminary assessments indicate certain veterans may be in high-risk groups.

Among former servicemembers receiving VA care, inpatient surveys at two VA medical centers indicated a prevalence rate of between 10 to 20 percent, while 52 percent of VA liver transplant patients were found to have hepatitis C. VA is evaluating its patients for risk factors and will be undertaking a surveillance activity to further assess hepatitis C prevalence.

Directors of the Miami Hepatitis C Research and Education Center include Dr. Lennox Jeffers, chief of hepatology, Miami VA Medical Center, and Dr. Eugene R. Schiff, former chief of hepatology, Miami VA Medical Center. Dr. Teresa Wright, chief of gastroenterology, San Francisco VA Medical Center, will direct the San Francisco Hepatitis C Research and Education Center.

The centers will work with Gary Roselle, head of VA's National Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Office at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center, in developing a national Hepatitis Registry to provide information for management and research.

The HCV infection is the most common chronic bloodborne infection in the United States. An estimated 3.9 million Americans have been infected with HCV. Infected persons are at risk for chronic liver disease or other HCV-related chronic diseases during the first two or more decades following initial infection and are a source of transmission to others.